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ABSTRACT

Noting that little effort has been devoted to the precise use of the term "theory" in rhetorical theory studies, this paper argues that, for the sake of scholarly precision in research, it is important to establish parameters of the term and to distinguish it from related terms and concepts. The paper reviews the advantages of the use of theory, contrasts the conceptions of a theory of rhetoric and a philosophy of rhetoric, and develops the goals and constituents of a contemporary theory. (FL)

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ASSESSING THEORIES OF RHETORIC

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ASSESSING THEORIES OF RHETORIC

With all of the attention devoted to studies associated with rhetorical theory, it is surprising that so little effort is devoted to precise use of the term "theory." However, for the sake of scholarly precision in research, it is important to set forth the parameters of the term and to distinguish it from related terms and concepts. This paper will first review the advantages of the use of theory. It will then argue the conception of "theory" which seems most appropriate (1) by contrasting the conceptions of a theory of rhetoric and a philosophy of rhetoric, (2) by focusing on the goals of a theory, and (3) by reviewing the constituents of a contemporary rhetorical theory. The aim of the analysis is to stimulate a dialogue on theory construction which complements the similar efforts of other communication scholars and which may ultimately assist the development of a "meta-theory" of rhetoric.[1] Such an endeavor is congruent with the action by the Speech Communication Association several years ago which consolidated the interests of the Rhetorical and Communication Theory Division.

The advantages of theory-oriented research have been emphasized by Miller[2] and King.[3] A theory: (1) gives direction to research; (2) increases the likelihood of generalizing beyond a single case study or a sample; (3) provides for an orderly extension of the boundaries of knowledge; (4) increases the probability of discovering general laws; (5) provides a basis for direct comparison of theories; (6) facilitates comparison of research results; (7) "and possibly most important, . . . focuses the researcher's initiative on understanding a phenomenon and not on finding a phenomenon that will demonstrate the utility of his favorite theory."[4] In short, theory-oriented research requires precise and parsimonious thinking and research and allows for consistent

expansion of knowledge.

An analysis of the term "rhetorical theory" reveals that each of the two words is used in a variety of contexts with a variety of intentions; the imminent review of the first term will prove a useful beginning point, and the second will be reviewed later. "Rhetoric" is used in many different ways, including references to: (1) a philosophy, such as I. A. Richards' The Philosophy of Rhetoric; (2) an academic discipline or field of inquiry, such as "Rhetoric as a Humane Study;"[5] (3) a method of studying communication or a way of viewing discourse, such as fulfilling the "function of adjusting ideas to people;"[6] (4) a methodological tool for research, such as "I would like to study the rhetorical implications of disco dancing;" (5) discourse itself, such as "Chicano rhetoric;" or (6) the quality of discourse, such as "mere rhetoric." The first three usages imply some relationship to an organized body of knowledge or a "theory." The fourth usage is, of course, a reference to the process of rhetorical criticism, and the last two usages refer to subjects for rhetorical criticism research. The relationship of criticism to theory is beyond the scope of the present analysis, but it has received incisive recent attention.[7]

Contrasting a Theory and a Philosophy of Rhetoric

The various usages of "rhetoric" described here can be visualized as existing on a hierarchy which, in turn, is useful in clarifying the nature of rhetorical theory. The hierarchy was explicated by both George Campbell[8] and Maurice Natanson;[9] each stratified levels or stages of "knowing" in remarkably similar systems.

	Natanson's "hierarchy"		Campbell's "stages"
(4) Highest:	philosophy of rhetoric	4th:	philosophy of rhetoric
(3)	"theory" of rhetoric	3rd:	"rules of composition" and "attendant circumstances"
(2)	"the technique of persuasion"	2nd:	"modes of arguing or forms of speech"
(1)	"rhetorical intention" (discourse)	1st:	"nature" (sense data)

In both systems a philosophy of rhetoric is the most sophisticated level and the most basic level is composed of rhetoric-as-discourse. Both systems suggest intermediate levels which represent formulations of theory. Both Campbell and Natanson asserted that the distinction between a theory of rhetoric and a philosophy of rhetoric is the latter's concern with underpinnings or presuppositions, but this distinction deserves critical scrutiny.

Bitzer explained that "the philosophy of rhetoric, in Campbell's view, is the area of relationships between the art of rhetoric and its foundation-science, human nature. . . ."[10] Similarly, Natanson argued that a philosophy of rhetoric is "the critique of presuppositions,"[11] and that it concerns itself with matters such as: "the relationship between language and what language denotes; the relationship between knowledge and what knowledge is 'of.' . . .; those states of consciousness manifest in persuasion. . . . ; the status of that knowledge which the persuader seeks to persuade us of."[12] However, Walter has expressed an alternate view of the assignment of concerns by Campbell and Natanson. Metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions or starting points ought to be the concern of the rhetorical theorist, Walter maintained.[13] The inconsistency of these views warrants more detailed consideration which most appropriately focuses on the questions, "What are the branches of philosophy which might be common to a theory of rhetoric?" and "What is the importance of these starting points in distinguishing among different theories?"

Philosophy is generally thought to be composed of three major metaphysical branches or issues: ontological, axiological, and epistemological. Whereas "metaphysics is distinguished by its questions being general," according to one writer, "a central part of metaphysics is ontology, . . . a particular theory of what exists. . . ."[14] /emphasis added/ Further, "metaphysics also borders on ethics. . . . It asks where values are grounded in the nature of things. . . ."[15] Thus, axiology, the "theory of values," is important, as is "investigation of its nature, criteria, and metaphysical status."[16] Finally, of major importance is epistemology, "the branch of philosophy which investigates the origin, structure, methods and validity of knowledge."[17] Thus, a philosophy of rhetoric would address some or all of these issues. However, the issues may also be important for a theory of rhetoric, as in the following hypothetical example. Suppose two scholars produced two "theories" of rhetorical communication in political campaigns. Theory 1 suggested that a candidate should not include logical reasoning in his speeches. Theory 2 suggested the same proposition. On the surface the theories would seem the same. However, if each theorist were asked to articulate his underlying reasons for the proposition (the presuppositions or underpinnings of the theory), the reasons might differ. Theory 1 might contend that voters are not "rational" (an ontological presupposition) and thus logical arguments are not useful. Theory 2 might argue that voters may or may not be "rational," but the issue is not relevant: Theory 2 might argue that voters are so deluged with information during the election season that they simply cannot process very much information of any kind about any candidate, let alone "logical arguments" (an epistemological presupposition); thus a candidate should devote his efforts to enhancing the identifiability of his name. In this hypothetical case, Theory 1 and Theory 2 are actually very dissimilar

because of their presuppositions. Thus, a rhetorical theory which is most useful would include an explanation of presuppositions. As will be discussed later, this explanation affects other constituents of a theory in important ways.

The Goals of a Theory

Like the word "rhetoric," the word "theory" also is used with a variety of intentions. It may be used in a very broad sense to refer to any conceptual thinking process, such as a "theory about buying a car." Or the focus on theory may be limited in some way, as in the analysis by Marie Hochmuth Nichols: ". . . the theory of rhetoric has something to do with the logical, emotional, and ethical dimensions of language. . . ."[18] In a narrower sense, theory may refer to any generalized principle or statement about factors or variables; for example, one might say, "I have a theory about why jokes aren't used in more sermons." Even more sophisticated treatments of the term "theory" suggest the wide variety of usages. Bormann,[19] Miller and Nicholson,[20] and Hawes[21] all emphasized that the term has a multiplicity of usages. However, the ideal for a rhetorical theory might be usefully pursued by examining Becker's explanation of the three functions of the rhetorical theorist and public address scholar.

Becker suggested that a first goal would be to identify and describe phenomena with "commonly understood and useful sets of categories or concepts."[22] For example, in the "modern" era of rhetorical theory, Smith, Blair, and Whately utilized categories which differed considerably from those employed by classical theorists because the discourse of eighteenth century England differed considerably from the rhetoric of the ancient era.[23] These categories may be called a "conceptual scheme."[24]

A second goal which Becker set for the theorist is to describe relationships "among these concepts as precisely as possible." An example might be drawn from contemporary theory-building efforts. Perelman developed a "new" concept of the universal audience in formulating his rhetorical theory. However, the concept does not seem easily understood and thus the theory is flawed by its lack of clarity.[25] However, Scult has made an admirable effort to explicate the theory by linking the concept of the universal audience to other concepts in Perelman's theory. In summarizing his explanation Scult said, "the interplay of universal audience, particular audience, and the speaker's own inclinations creates the tension which makes the inventional process and the argumentation which flows from it rational--or at least as rational as our human fallibilities allow."[26] The kind of theory-building demonstrated here by Scult contributes to what Becker called an "analytic system"[27] and it serves to do more than describe phenomena: it explains phenomena.

The third goal of the rhetorical scholar, according to Becker, is to identify interaction of factors or concepts in a way which allows predictable results. Achieving success at this level of thinking is the embodiment of what Becker called a theory. However, the view that prediction is the goal of a rhetorical theory may be controversial, and thus it warrants further attention. Some might argue (A) that prediction is not a proper realm for the "humanist" or (B) that prediction is simply not possible. The most appropriate response to these views is a working definition of prediction and a look at some rhetorical studies which have employed prediction.

Prediction is simply "the process and the expression of an inference made with respect to a future event."[28] Even within the social sciences, predictions need not necessarily be scientifically and statistically derived,

they need not express causal relationships, and they are not the same as "laws."[29] Rather, predictions are like prescriptions in the sense that they are extensions of explanations. That is, to the extent that a rhetorical theory accurately describes and explains the relationships among phenomena, the theory prescribes what a communicator should do in order to achieve success; further, the theory predicts that if the prescription is followed, success will result. For example, Kenneth Burke's theory places heavy emphasis on developing the concept of identification; his theory thus inherently prescribes that a speaker make efforts to establish consubstantiality with an audience, and it predicts, in turn, that the likelihood of speaker success is enhanced.

Public address studies have developed the type of prediction described here, though not within a theoretic framework. For example, in his classic study of the Nixon-Truman analog, Rosenfield concluded that "we may further predict that a speaker who chooses to argue in his own defense over the airwaves is unlikely to limit himself to defensive remarks."[30] /emphasis added/ In another study, Gonchar and Hahn analyzed the rhetorical behavior of Richard Nixon and developed some propositions about his future "rhetorical predictability."[31] Becker made a plea for additional studies of the type described here and urged that these have a closer relationship to contemporary rhetorical theories, and he also urged testing of such theories.[32]

The Constituents of a Rhetorical Theory

The foregoing analysis has attempted to focus on the fundamental nature and the goals of a rhetorical theory. The next issue of importance regards the constituents of a rhetorical theory. As suggested earlier, the presuppositions of a theory are paramount, and these will, in turn, determine the scope of the theory. For example, the theorizing of Maurice Natanson and Henry Johnstone

focuses principally upon epistemological matters, and thus much of it focuses on the rhetor's "self."[33] Ontological matters are the principal focus of many other theories, as emphasized by Campbell.[34] As Scott argued, these presuppositional variations of focus will determine a second constituent of a theory: the definition of rhetoric,[35] and Kenneth Burke serves as a good example. Holland has explained that "Burke's definition of rhetoric grows out of his basic assumptions about . . . society,"[36] and these are, of course, ontological presuppositions. Burke defines rhetoric as "a symbolic means of inducing cooperation"[37] by means of identification in a society in which estrangement is "natural."[38]

As indicated earlier, a third constituent of a theory should be propositional statements about the relationships between concepts or factors. Again, the focus of these propositions will be determined to a large extent by the starting points or definitions of rhetoric. For example, the presuppositions about language by the general semanticists differ greatly from those of Richard Weaver. General semantics "covers the whole range of human evaluation, and the prescriptions offered for control of . . . unwanted feelings or emotions."[39] Weaver, on the other hand, presupposed that language is advisory or "sermonic," and "he particularly attacked general semantics for . . . its attempt to denude language of all reflections of value tendencies."[40] Thus, the propositions by general semantics theorists focus on efficient, "value-free" communication, whereas Weaver's theory is centered on axiological matters.

Finally, the propositional statements of a rhetorcial theory may be influenced by the position that one takes in the controversy about whether discourse is best described in terms of situation,[41] motive,[42] or genre.[43] In any case, as explored above, a contemporary theory would seek to develop meaningful categories for describing discourse.

Conclusion

This analysis has not sought to accept or reject specific contemporary rhetorical theories. Instead, this analysis has sought to set forth a framework within which theories might be assessed. Specifically, it is argued herein that a useful theory should explain the underlying presuppositions, should seek to identify and describe phenomena, should explain the relationships of such phenomena, and should seek prediction of results in a way that allows prescribing effective communication. Lastly, the constituents of a theory have been briefly outlined. As Yoos recently maintained, citing Martin Steinmann,

> Metarhetorical research is basic in the sense that its object, theories of rhetoric, is the basis, a necessary condition, of basic rhetorical research. For metatheories describe (or prescribe) the properties of adequate theories.[44]

Thus, to the extent that the present framework provides useful thinking, subsequent analyses may seek to modify the framework or to use it in theory construction.

[1]Several journal issues have been devoted to theory-building issues. Communication Quarterly 25 (Winter 1977), "Alternative Theoretical Bases for the Study of Human Communication: A Symposium"; Western Journal of Speech Communication 41 (Winter 1977), "Symposium: What Criteria Should be Used to Judge the Admissability of Evidence to Support Theoretical Propositions in Communication Research?"; Western Journal of Speech Communication 42 (Winter 1978), "Further Exploration of the Question . . . 'What Criteria Should be Used to Judge the Admissability of Evidence to Support Theoretical Propositions Regarding Communication Research?'" See also, Gerald R. Miller, "The Current Status of Theory and Research in Interpersonal Communication" and Art Bochner, "On Taking Ourselves Seriously: An Analysis of Some Persistent Problems and Promising Directions in Interpersonal Research," Human Communication Research 4 (Winter 1978), 164-191.

[2]Gerald R. Miller, "Theory in Quantitative Speech Research," Western Speech 28 (Winter 1964), 15-22.

[3]Stephen W. King, "Theory Testing: An Analysis and Extension," Western Speech 37 (Winter 1973), 13-22.

[4]King, 21.

[5]Everett Hunt, "Rhetoric as a Humane Study," Quarterly Journal of Speech 41 (April 1955), 114-117.

[6]Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech 39 (December 1953), 413.

[7]Roderick P. Hart, "Theory-Building and Rhetorical Criticism: An Informal Statement of Opinion," Central States Speech Journal 37 (Spring 1976), 70-77.

[8]George Campbell, The Philosophy of Rhetoric, Lloyd F. Bitzer, ed. (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1963), pp. 1-11.

[9]Maurice Natanson, "The Limits of Rhetoric," Quarterly Journal of Speech 41 (April 1955), 139.

[10]Philosophy of Rhetoric, "Editor's Introduction," P. xv.

[11]Natanson, 138.

[12]Natanson, 138.

[13]Otis M. Walter, "On Views of Rhetoric, Whether Conservative or Progressive," Quarterly Journal of Speech 49 (December 1963), 367-382.

[14]A. R. Lacey, A Dictionary on Philosophy (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), P. 128.

[15]Lacey, P. 129.

[16]Dagobert Runes, Dictionary of Philosophy (New York: Philosophical Library, 1960), P. 32.

[17]Runes, P. 94.

[18]Rhetoric and Criticism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), P. 13.

[19]Ernest G. Bormann, Theory and Research in the Communicative Arts (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), Chapter 6, especially P. 105.

[20]Gerald R. Miller and Henry E. Nicholson, Communication Inquiry (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1976), Chapter 2, especially P. 57.

[21]Leonard C. Hawes, Pragmatics of Analoguing (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.), Chapter 3.

[22]Samuel L. Becker, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," in The Prospect of Rhetoric, Lloyd F. Bitzer and Edwin Black, eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), P. 22.

[23]Douglas Ehninger, "Campbell, Blair and Whately, Revisited," Southern Speech Journal 28 (Spring 1963), 169-182.

[24]Becker, P. 22.

[25]John W. Ray, "Perelman's Universal Audience," The Quarterly Journal of Speech 64 (December 1978), 361-375.

[26]Allen Scult, "Perelman's Universal Audience: One Perspective," Central States Speech Journal 27 (Fall 1976), 180.

[27]Becker, P. 22.

[28]Dagobert D. Runes, Dictionary of Philosophy (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Co., 1978), P. 249.

[29]Julian L. Simon, Basic Research Methods in Social Science (New York: Random House, 1969), pp. 456-457.

[30]L. W. Rosenfield, "A Case Study in Speech Criticism," The Nixon-Truman Analog 35 (November 1968), 449.

[31]Ruth M. Gonchar and Dan F. Hahn, "The Rhetorical Predictability of Richard M. Nixon," Today's Speech 19 (Fall 1971), 3-12.

[32]Becker, P. 22.

[33]Richard Cherwitz, "Rhetoric as a 'Way of Knowing': An Attenuation of the Epistemological Claims of the 'New Rhetoric'," and James W. Hikins, "The Epistemological Relevance of Intrapersonal Rhetoric," Southern Speech Communication Journal 42 (Spring 1977), 207-227.

[34]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Ontological Foundations of Rhetorical Theory," Philosophy and Rhetoric 3 (Spring 1970), 97-108.

[35]Robert Scott, "On Not Defining 'Rhetoric'," Philosophy and Rhetoric 6 (Spring 1973), 81-96.

[36]L. Virginia Holland, Counterpoint: Kenneth Burke and Aristotle's Theories of Rhetoric (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), P. 24.

[37]Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), P. 43.

[38]Holland, P. 26.

[39]Harry L. Weinberg, Levels of Knowing and Existence: Studies in General Semantics (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1959), P. 10.

[40]Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks, eds., Language is Sermonic: Richard M. Weaver on the Nature of Rhetoric (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), P. 18.

[41]Lloyd Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," Philosophy and Rhetoric 1 (January 1968), 1-14.

[42]Walter R. Fisher, "A Motive View of Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech 56 (April 1970), 131-139.

[43]Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, eds., Form and Genre (Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association, n.d.).

[44]George E. Yoos, "A Revision of the Concept of Ethical Appeal," Philosophy and Rhetoric 12 (Winter, 1979), 43.